

Witness Testimony: Ashin Nayaka

Testimony of Ven. Ashin Nayaka, Leading Member of International Burmese Monks Organization and Visiting Scholar at Columbia University
 an2201@columbia.edu December 3, 2007, 2:30-4:30 PM Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I am a Burmese Buddhist monk, a visiting professor at Columbia University in New York. I came here to be the voice of my fellow monks and be the voice of the people of Burma, who have long been denied all freedoms, including religious freedom, under one of the most repressive regimes in the world. People all over the world have witnessed the terrible and wicked system of dictatorship imposed upon us. Through the help of international media, the world was able to see the brutality. The military regime has killed peaceful demonstrators. They have killed monks, who are highly respected by the people, as Buddhism is major religion in Burma. They have emptied monasteries, which are not only places of worship and religious functions, but also for education, maintenance of culture, and caring for HIV/AIDS patients and orphans, duties which the regime has neglected. Burma's military regime have forcibly disrobed monks, beaten them, and assaulted them very badly. They have committed crimes against humanity and these recent brutalities will stand as a great tragedy in our long history of monastic Buddhism. This wicked regime committed these atrocities in full view of the world. They are shameless, seeking only to systematically oppress us for decades to come. We are all deeply concerned about the fate of fellow monks, including U Gambira who led the recent protest in Burma, as well as all political prisoners. I hope that international governments and the United Nations pressure the military regime to immediately grant the ICRC access to these detainees and release them immediately. What I wish to say is: the spiritual authority of Burma resides in the Dhamma (Teachings of Buddha). The Dhamma in Burma is both protected and practiced primarily in the minds and hearts of the monks and nuns in our country. Of course, the lay people practice Dhamma too. But the symbol of hope in our society is the Sanghas (the order of monastic). The religious order of monks has been the face of Burma since Buddhism was introduced into the nation over a thousand years ago, and its influence can be seen everywhere, from the hillsides dotted with pagodas, the monks in their saffron yellow robes, and the monasteries in almost every village that shape the character of the villagers and their institutions. At present the Sangha is the enemy of the regime. If this continues unaddressed, further bloody confrontation is unavoidable. Our spiritual obligation is to freedom, not to silence or submission. Today, we know that several leading monks in Burma are still on the run. We do not know with any accuracy how many monks have been killed, how many were forcibly disrobed. We do not know how many are in prison. We do not know how many monks have been taken to secret locations. There is a terrible secrecy and silence over Burma. We are at a critical moment in history. What we do know is that a number of prominent monasteries have been closed. Others emptied. Serious questions remain: where have all the monks gone? Where has the global outcry gone? This should be of grave concern for all governments worldwide. Strong, effective and timely intervention by the international community is urgently needed. This is a moral crisis that Americans must stand for. The Saffron Revolution is not a power struggle, but a conflict between peace and moral freedom on one side and the forces of political repression on the other. Participation in this spiritual protest is justifiable in Buddhism. The religious policy of the Saffron Revolution, this Buddhist revolution of the conscience, continues to be one of peace. Throughout the Burmese history when the country was in crisis or when the people faced emergency, the spiritual leaders played a significant role in creating and maintaining peace and stability in society. But monks today are facing great challenges. The very existence of monastic life is being destroyed by the evil military regime and it will face bloodshed again, if the international community, including UN Security Council, cannot find a collective and effective way to stop this evil regime from killings and arrests. As long as the UN Security Council could not make the regime to engage in a meaningful and time-bound dialogue with democratic opposition, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, for peaceful transition to democracy, the spiritual revolution of monks and people will continue and another brutal crack down will be unavoidable. The light of the Dhamma is our guide in this profound expression of spiritual revolution that inspires the hearts of millions around the world. The light of your dignity and your commitment to freedom is our source of strength. Since the non-violent approach is our way, we have concluded that we will remain peaceful under all circumstances. We firmly believe that our commitment to the Dhamma will defeat these unjust rulers in Burma. We remain steadfast in our commitment to the freedom in our country and the freedom in our own hearts. All these things Americans value and cherish. Freedom for the people of Burma cannot be denied. The cost of that freedom is the only question. Finally, I would like to thank President Bush and First Lady, the United States Congress and the American people for their support in our struggle and also I would like to ask President Bush to make Burma his legacy of freedom. Thank you.